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Pope Francis listens as Sr. Hermenegild Makoro, a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, speaks during an audience with commission members at the Vatican Sept. 21. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano, handout)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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In December 2013, Pope Francis sparked hope that the Catholic Church was (finally!) taking the scandal of clergy sexual abuse seriously. He created a group to advise him and future popes on how the church worldwide could protect children, appointing experts on the issue and even survivors of abuse to a new Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

Now, as of this writing four years later, that commission has lapsed into an inactive state. Its members' terms of office, as set by the group's Vatican-approved statutes, expired Dec. 17. Neither the pope nor the Vatican have made known when or if the current members will be reappointed or new members found.

That Francis has allowed this lapse to occur is worrisome. A commission without validly appointed members ceases to be a commission; its members may carry on their work but if they do, they do so as individuals without legal standing or vested authority to back them. What work could they carry on? This never should have been allowed to happen.

That the Vatican felt no need to offer an official explanation is just as worrisome, because it suggests that the protection of children is not as high a priority as statements from the Vatican say it is. That decision makers in the Vatican apparently didn't realize — or didn't care — that this lapse would be perceived negatively is also troubling. A lack of an official response sends a tone-deaf and disappointing message to Catholics and the world. It points to the causal negligence at the heart of the scandal that has plagued the church for decades and demonstrates why the church can't shake allegations that its leaders "just don't get it."

We cannot forget that less than 10 months ago, Marie Collins, an original appointee and a survivor of clergy abuse, resigned from the commission out of frustration with an intransigent Vatican bureaucracy.

We've been told not to read too much into the vacant commission. It's just a bureaucratic snafu, we're told, and it will be corrected by April, when the commission's next plenary assembly is set. The office in the Curia meant to support the work of the commission will continue its work, we've been told. These statements, meant to be assurances, sound too much like hollow promises of the kind we're been programmed to hear from church officials when it comes to the abuse of minors by clergy.

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In March, Collins recalled that when she was appointed, "I said publicly that if I found what was happening behind closed doors was in conflict with what was being said to the public I would not remain. This point has come. I feel I have no choice but to resign if I am to retain my integrity." We seem to have reached a time again when private actions are not matching public statements.

The Vatican has known since Collins' resignation that the commission was suffering a credibility problem. Their bureaucratic neglect on commission memberships only exacerbates that problem. We repeat: that the Vatican didn't recognize this as a problem or doesn't care that it is a problem is very worrisome.

When Francis met with the commission for the first time in September, he praised its members, saying "Without you who brought the thing off the ground it would have been impossible to do what we have done and to do what we must still do in the Curia." We fear that with the commission empty, even for a few months, its credibility will continue to erode and "the work we still must do" won't get done.

We have noted in recent editorials that the Catholic Church as a whole has made great strides in addressing the sexual abuse of children. In many ways the church has set up model programs and procedures to deal with this crime. But we have also warned repeatedly that as the situation improves, complacency becomes the enemy of continued progress. Complacency puts children at risk and that is something we cannot allow to happen.